

The Birdham Assemblage

Further finds of
Middle and Late Bronze Age pottery
from the West Sussex
Coastal Plain

by
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Technical report 9

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the West Sussex Coastal Plain*
by Mike Seager Thomas
(text commissioned by Archaeology South-East)

THE BIRDHAM ASSEMBLAGE: FURTHER FINDS OF MIDDLE AND LATE BRONZE AGE POTTERY FROM THE SUSSEX COASTAL PLAIN

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Introduction

The pottery assemblage from this site provides a further opportunity to examine a range of associated MBA and LBA pottery forms and fabrics from the Sussex Coastal Plain. Such study is essential if we are fully to understand the development of the region during the period, for, by adding to our detailed knowledge of Sussex Bronze Age pottery, it improves its chronological resolution, and so helps contextualize the sites which yielded it. The assemblage comprises 223 sherds weighing 1.5 kilograms. Sherds of both dates come from a range of different feature types, most are abraded or burnt, and all were associated with finds of one or more other category. This pattern would not be inconsistent with long-term occupation. The co-occurrence of a similar fabric suite in most features ([Table 1](#)) and a cross-context conjoin between sherds from pits 8 and 14, however, suggest the possibility that the bulk of the assemblage and the feature fills that yielded it belong to a single period. Comparisons with pottery from other Sussex and non-Sussex sites place this in the LBA between c. 900 and 800 cal BC. The MBA pottery should, on current dating, be at least 300 years earlier.

Middle Bronze Age Pottery

Although associated with later pottery, a MBA component within the assemblage is indicated by the presence of sherds in a thick, very coarse flint-tempered fabric (*CF*), including a finger-tip impressed rim likely to belong to a Deverel-Rimbury bucket-urn or convex-sided jar (No 1). Finger-tip impressions on the tops of rims, though occasionally present in Sussex assemblages (e.g. New Barn Down and Patcham-Fawcett: Curwen 1934, fig. 17; Seager Thomas 2008) are not characteristic of Sussex Deverel-Rimbury traditions, but are widely associated with those traditions outside the county (e.g. Barrett 1973). (Note: a similar rim form in the LBA assemblage from Knapp Farm, Bosham, is on a much smaller scale: Hamilton 1997, fig. 9.14). Radiocarbon dates associated with Deverel-Rimbury pottery from Sussex and elsewhere place it between c.1500 and 1150 Cal BC (Needham 1996, 133; Hamilton 2003, appendix 6.2).

Context	Fabrics																
	FF		FMF1		FMF2		MF1		MF2		MF3		CF		U		
	Number of sherds/weight in grams																
MRB 00 (Archaeology South-East)																	
3	0	0	0	0	11	60	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
5	0	0	2	16	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
7	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
9	2	12	7	32	0	0	10	50	5	39	11	42	1	28	0	0	
15	1	3	2	5	1	3	19	17	2	3	2	1	0	0	0	0	
17	0	0	0	0	1	3	5	35	3	20	0	0	1	6	1	5	
19	0	0	0	0	5	115	7	54	11	211	0	0	1	55	0	0	
21	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
29	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	7	0	0	4	34	0	0	0	0	
30	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	
31	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	6	0	0	0	0	
BI 97 (Southern Archaeology)																	
SA11	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	6	35	0	0	0	0	0	0	
SA13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	
SA16	0	0	19	109	3	28	18	117	10	48	3	13	9	91	0	0	
SA18	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	37	8	32	6	38	3	48	0	0	
SA20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	45	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Σ	0	0	19	109	3	28	25	158	28	160	10	53	12	139	0	0	

Table 1. Quantification of Bronze Age fabrics

Late Bronze Age Pottery: Typology

Although small, the assemblage comprises sherds from a minimum of fifteen — and probably many more — different vessels. The forms present are characteristic of an assemblage belonging to the post Deverel-Rimbury pottery tradition (*vide* Barrett 1980). Present are sherds from fine ware bowls, a coarse ware bowl, and both fine and coarse ware jars. Collectively, these represent a wide range of possible activities. The bulk of the feature sherds from the site are shown in Figure 1 (Nos 2–13).

Fine ware bowls

The assemblage incorporates shoulder sherds from two fine wares bowls. The first was bi-partite (No 3). Its defining characteristic is its angularity. Bi-partite bowls occur in other Coastal Plain assemblages but, where reconstructable, none has a shoulder angle as acute as that from Birdham. Sussex parallels for it are restricted to the Downs (e.g. Stoke Clump: Cunliffe 1966, fig. 1). The second is round shouldered and, on its shoulder, is decorated with a series of widely-spaced vertical burnished lines (No 5). It has no exact parallel but two Sussex sites, Yapton and Shinewater Park, Eastbourne, yielded comparable coarse

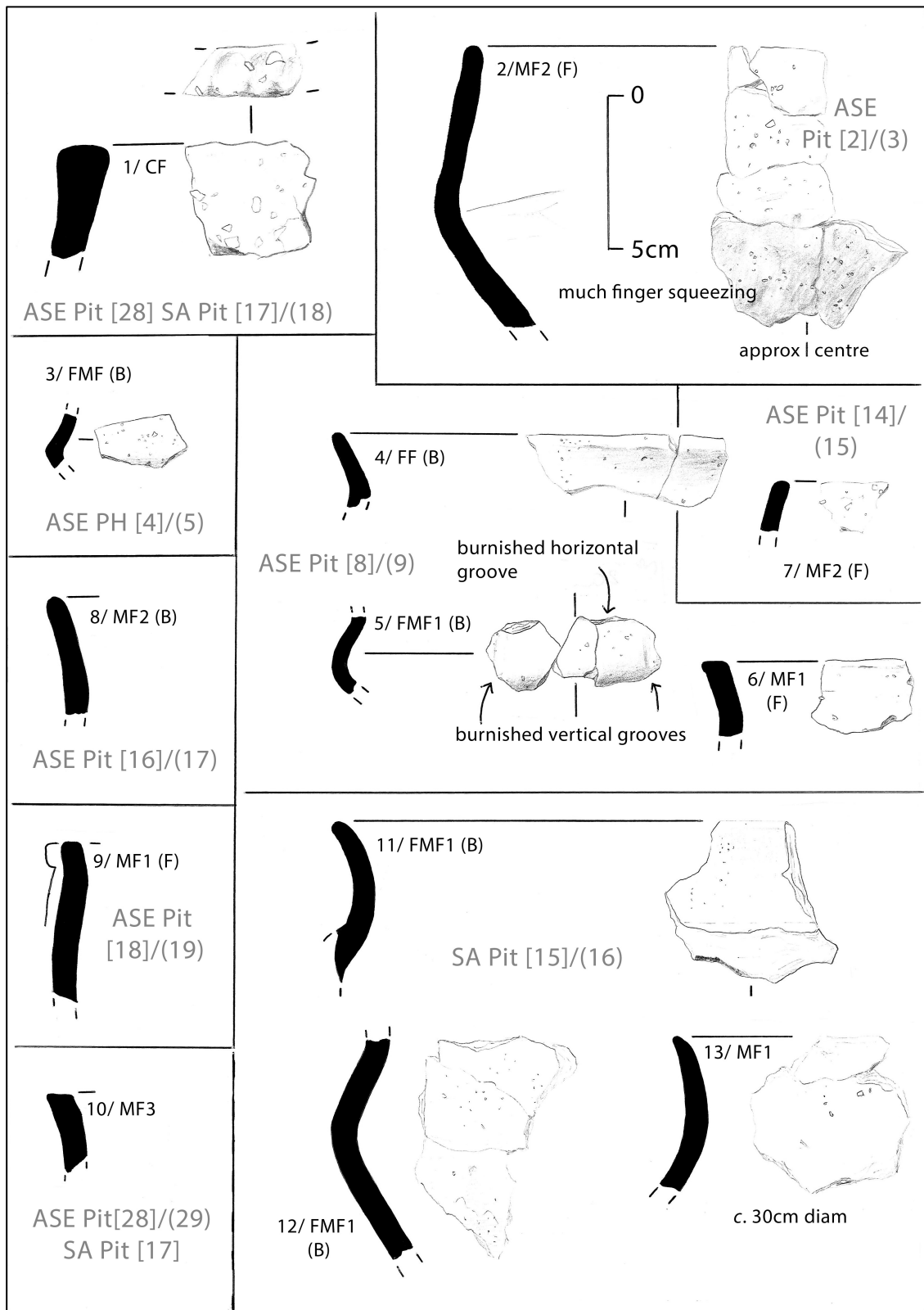


Figure 1. Bronze Age pottery from Main Road, Birdham

wares (Hamilton 1987, fig. 5; Seager Thomas 2008, figs 9.26 & 11.7), and a third Sussex site, Bishopstone, a larger fine ware example

(Hamilton 1977, fig. 45). It may be the forerunner of a round shouldered bowl/jar form present in assemblages from sites like Green Lane, Eastbourne (Hodson 1962, fig. 1), Roundstone Lane, Angmering (Seager Thomas 2003), Ford (period II) (Hamilton 2004, figs 15.47 & 17.52), East Beach Selsey (Seager Thomas 2001, fig. 12.12), and Park Brow (Wolseley & Smith 1924, figs. 5 & 10).

Coarse ware bowl

Pit 2 yielded sherds most likely belonging to a large bi-partite bowl with a straight (as opposed to concave) upper shoulder (No 2). Close parallels for it come from Hawkinge, Kent (Hamilton & Seager Thomas 2002), and Petter's Sports Field, Egham, Surrey (O'Connell 1986, fig. 49). Approximate Sussex parallels include a smaller fine ware bowl from Seaside Field Selsey (Seager Thomas 2001, fig. 6) and a jar or bowl with a more obtuse shoulder angle from Kingston Buci (Curwen & Hawkes 1931, fig. 17). Vessel 2's thin body and fingered surface are common to and characteristic of much coarse post Deverel-Rimbury pottery.

Shouldered Jars

Four or five shouldered jar forms were identified. Two sherds in different fine to medium fabrics come from vessels with concave necks and rounded rims (Nos 11 & 13). Two sherds in different coarse fabrics come from vessels with flared necks and flat topped rims (Nos 6 & 10), and a third, in another coarse fabric, from a vessel with a flared neck and a rounded rim (No 8). Shouldered jars in a variety of forms are recurrent in post Deverel-Rimbury assemblages but the order within the tradition of many of these forms — including those from Birdham — has not yet been established with certainty. Vessel 11's notched shoulder is paralleled at Hollingbury (Cunliffe 1966, fig. 2.56). The closest parallels for vessel 13 come from outside the county in assemblages from sites like St Mary's Hospital, Carshalton (Adkins & Needham 1985, fig. 10.324), which is earlier, but a similar, albeit smaller decorated parallel comes from Stoke Clump (Cunliffe 1966, fig. 1.9). Parallels for vessels 6 and 10 come from Highdown (Wilson 1940, figs 3 & 7) and sites outside the county like Petter's Sports Field (O'Connell 1986, fig. 47), parallels for vessel 8 from Thundersbarrow Hill, near Shoreham (Hamilton 1993, fig. A4.7) and Petter's Sports Field (O'Connell 1986, fig. 42). A flared fine ware neck with a rounded rim (No 4) may also belong to a shouldered jar or, alternatively, a round shouldered bowl/jar of the sort referred to under *fine ware bowls* above. It has a jar parallel with a taller neck and decorated rim in the assemblage from East Beach Selsey (Seager Thomas 2001 fig. 12.13).

Late Bronze Age Pottery: Date

The post Deverel-Rimbury tradition is divisible into three chronologically sequential phases represented by plain ware assemblages, ‘developed’ plain ware assemblages, and decorated assemblages (Needham 1996). Individual Birdham vessels can be paralleled in assemblages belonging to all three of these phases, but, collectively, they are best paralleled in ‘developed’ plainware and decorated assemblages. Among the foregoing Sussex assemblages, the best examples are Yapton, which yielded a small quantity of decorated fine wares (Hamilton 1987), Shinewater Park, where an equally small group of decorated fine wares was associated with externally finger-tipped coarse ware rims, a trait usually associated with decorated or later assemblages, and Stoke Clump, which yielded a substantial decorated assemblage (Cunliffe 1966). Both Yapton and Shinewater Park have radiocarbon dates which straddle the ninth century cal BC (Hamilton 2002, appendix 6.2), while dates associated with decorated assemblages from outside the county, including that from Petter’s Sports Field, focus on the seventh century cal BC (Needham 1996, 137). A date close to that of Yapton and Shinewater Park is proposed for the Birdham assemblage. In relative terms the occupation of all three of these sites post-dates that of coastal plain sites like Ford (Period I), Knapp Farm and, possibly, Seaside Field Selsey, none of which yielded decorated fine wares, and pre-dates that of Ford (Period II), East Beach Selsey and Roundstone Lane, which, like Stoke Clump, Hollingbury and Petter’s Sports Field, yielded many forms characteristic of decorated assemblages.

Late Bronze Age Pottery: Fabrics

The Late Bronze Age fabrics range from fine to coarse and all but one are flint-tempered (Table 2). In terms of the vessel types fashioned from them, the grades represented, and the ratio of fine to coarse wares present, many of the Coastal Plain assemblages referred to above are similar to the Birdham assemblage and most incorporate individual fabrics which are indistinguishable from individual Birdham fabrics. None, however, provides a *group* parallel for Birdham; and several incorporate fabrics which have a restricted distribution (Table 3). This is best attributed to local fashion and/or the use of locally available resources and, for Birdham, argues in favour of localized pottery production and against specialized pottery production during the period. It contrasts with evidence from slightly later Coastal Plain sites such as Roundstone Lane and both contemporary and later downland sites which show abundant evidence for specialized pottery production (Seager Thomas 2001; 2008; Hamilton 1993; 2002, 39).

Fabric code	Summary	Sherd thickness	Mineral inclusions
FF	Fine flint and sand	6mm	Sparse to moderate (5-10%) medium sand-sized burnt flint, moderate (>10%) fine quartz sand, and patchy, rare (2%) Fe-oxide nodules.
FMF1	Fine to medium flint and sand	4-7mm	Sparse to moderate (5-10%) medium to coarse sand-sized burnt flint, moderate (>10%) fine quartz sand, and very rare (<1%) Fe-oxide nodules in some sherds. A coarser variant of fabric FF.
FMF2	Common fine to medium flint and sand	5-9mm	Moderate to common (10-20%) medium sand-sized burnt flint and moderate (>10%) fine quartz sand.
MF1	Sparse medium flint and sand	7mm	Sparse (5-7%) medium sand-sized to small granule-sized burnt flint and common (>25%) fine to medium quartz sand.
MF2	Common medium flint and sand	6-11mm	Moderate (c15%) medium sand-sized to small granule-sized burnt flint and moderate (>10%) fine to medium quartz sand.
MF3	Medium to coarse flint	7mm	Moderate (10-15%) medium sand-sized to (mostly) small granule-sized burnt flint and occasional (un-quantifiable) Fe-oxide nodules.
CF	Coarse flint	11-12mm	Moderate to common (15-20%) coarse sand-sized to small pebble-sized burnt flint, moderate (c10%) medium quartz sand, flint and occasional (un-quantifiable) Fe-oxide nodules.
U	?Limestone	7mm	Moderate to common (15-20%) decalcified ?limestone and angular, coarse sand-sized Fe-oxides.

NB. No attempt was made to distinguish fabrics incorporating chaff.

Table 2. Description of Bronze Age pottery fabrics

Site	Fabric inclusions (excluding sand and chaff)									Reference:
	flint	Grog & flint	Grog	Shell & flint	Shell	granite	Oolite	?Limestone	Glauconite	
Angmering Bypass	✓	✓								Seager Thomas 2003 (D 5210)
Birdham	✓							✓		Table 2
Centenary House, Durrington	✓									Seager Thomas forthcoming b
Knapp Farm, Bosham	✓	✓								Hamilton 1997, 80
Climping	✓	✓								Seager Thomas forthcoming c
Ford	✓	✓								Hamilton 2004 (layer 1085)
Highdown	✓	✓				✓				Wilson 1940; Hamilton pers comm
Kingston Buci	✓				✓					
Littlehampton	✓	P	P							Seager Thomas unpub
Rustington	✓	✓								Hamilton 1990, 8
Golf Links Lane Selsey	✓			✓						White 1934, 42
Seaside Field Selsey	✓					✓	✓			Seager Thomas 1998, 20; 2001a, 21
Coast Guard Station Selsey	✓								✓	Seager Thomas 1998, 20; unpub (feature 34)
Yapton	✓	✓								Hamilton 1987, 56-8

Table 3. Pottery fabrics from LBA sites on or in the Sussex Coastal Plain.
P = unstratified sherds of possible post Deverel-Rimbury type

The importance of the Late Bronze Age assemblage

The Site

The pottery forms present would, like those comprising many post Deverel-Rimbury assemblages, fulfill a wide range of roles and most likely reflects proximate *domestic* activity. Possibly their mixing with other finds categories indicates a single focus of activity. On the other hand, the dispersal of individual fabric types across a wide area and a range of feature types, the admixture of earlier pottery, and the occurrence of conjoining sherds in two different pits may indicate their concentration elsewhere prior to final deposition, either in a midden or other cut features, material from which was subsequently dug-out and re-deposited in the features from which it was recovered during the excavation. In two quite different ways this has implications for the way in which the site was formed. Many features may, for example, have been filled simultaneously; but it is equally possible that as one was dug another was filled-in. These issues have been discussed in detail for the LBA pottery assemblages from Knapp Farm (Hamilton 1997, 79), Selsey Bill (Seager Thomas 1998, 12; 2001, 19) and Yapton (Hamilton 1987, 53).

The Region

The Birdham assemblage belongs to a widespread and long-lived pottery tradition, although it differs from those of two other LBA sites on the Coastal Plain, Climping and Centenary House, Durrington. These sites comprised features similar to those at Birdham and yet yielded fewer pottery forms and fabrics. This may reflect the roles of the three sites, their relative prosperity, and/or their dates (Climping and Centenary House were earlier than Birdham) (Seager Thomas 2003; 2005). Additionally, Birdham's pottery procurement strategy differed from that of many other LBA sites. In view of its use of Wealden (that is: non-local) stone for querns ([Appendix 1](#)) this is perhaps surprising. However, an explanation for this is suggested by the dating of the pottery, for, although LBA settlement is known to be common on the Coastal Plain, sites of its precise date are not. Quite simply at that time and in that place a local context in which specialized pottery products could be exchanged did not exist (cf. Roundstone Lane, Angmering: Seager Thomas 2003).

Catalogue of feature sherds

(Fig. 1)

Middle Bronze Age

Pit SA17/ Pit 28

1. Finger-tip impressed rim of large bucket urn or convex-sided jar. Very large diameter. *Fabric CF*. Buff exterior surface, dark grey interior surface and core. Context SA18 .

Late Bronze Age

Pit 2

2. Rounded rim, straight upper shoulder and obtuse, sharp to rounded shoulder angle of bi-partite bowl with a rim diameter of *c.* 22cm. *Fabric MF2*. Roughly finger-finished with traces of finger-smearing. ?Burnt brown to dark grey surfaces and core. Context 3.

Posthole 4

3. Concave upper shoulder and sharp, slightly obtuse shoulder angle of bi-partite bowl with a shoulder angle diameter of *c.* 18cm. *Fabric FMF2*. Burnished exterior surface. Burnt orange to dark grey surfaces and core. Context 5.

Pits 8 and 14

4. Rounded rim and flared, straight to very slightly concave neck of shouldered bowl or jar with a rim diameter of *c.* 19cm. *Fabric FF*. Burnished surfaces. Burnt orange to dark grey surfaces and core. Two conjoining sherds: contexts 9 and 15.

Pit 8

5. Rounded shoulder of a round shouldered bowl decorated with shallow burnished lines around the neck base and vertically on the shoulder and with a shoulder angle diameter of *c.* 16cm. *Fabric FMF1*. Furnished surfaces. Dark grey to dark grey brown surfaces and red brown core. Context 9.

6. Flat topped, slightly externally expanded rim and straight, flared neck of shouldered jar with an un-measurable large rim diameter. *Fabric MF1*. Smooth (possibly burnished) surfaces. Dark grey brown exterior surface, red brown interior surface and dark grey to dark brown core. Context 9.

Unillustrated. Rounded rim of jar of uncertain form with an un-measurable medium or large rim diameter. *Fabric MF2*. Roughly finished. Dark grey exterior surface, dark grey brown interior surface and dark brown core. Context 9.

Pit 14

7. Rounded rim of bowl or jar of uncertain form with an un-measurable medium rim diameter. *Fabric MF2*. Roughly finished with traces of finger-smearing on the interior. Dark grey surfaces and core. Context 15.

Pit 16

8. Rounded rim and flared, slightly concave neck of shouldered jar with an un-measurable medium to large rim diameter. *Fabric MF2*. Burnished exterior surface. Worn dark grey surfaces and dark brown core. Context 17.

Pit 18

9. Flat, externally expanded to squared rim of ?convex-sided jar with a rim diameter of c. 18cm. *Fabric MF1*. Roughly finger-finished with traces of finger-smearing. Dark grey to grey brown surfaces and core. Context 19.

Unillustrated. Flat base and slightly convex lower body of large jar of uncertain form with a base diameter of c. 15cm diameter. *Fabric MF2*. Smooth (possibly burnished) surfaces. Orange exterior surfaces, dark grey to buff interior surfaces and dark grey core. Context 19.

Unillustrated. Slightly expanded rim with internal bevel of convex-sided jar or slightly expanded, flat-topped rim and flared neck of shouldered jar with an un-measurable medium or large rim diameter. *Fabric MF1*. Smooth (possibly burnished) surfaces. Orange/red

brown exterior surface, dark brown interior surface and dark grey core. Context 19.

Pit 28

10. Flat squared rim with slight internal bevel and flared neck of shouldered jar with an un-measurable medium rim diameter. *Fabric MF3*. Roughly finished surfaces. Burnt orange surfaces and core. Context 29.

Unillustrated. Rounded shoulder of shouldered jar with an un-measurable medium or large diameter. *Fabric MF3*. Roughly finger-finished with traces of finger-smearing. Dark grey brown to red brown surfaces and grey core. Context 31.

Pit SA15

11. Concave neck and rounded rim of shouldered jar. Rim diameter c. 27cm. *Fabric FMF1*. Burnished. Dark grey surfaces and grey core. Context SA16 .
12. Rounded shoulder of shouldered jar. *Fabric FMF1*. Burnished. Brown exterior surface, dark grey interior surface and grey core. Context SA16
13. Concave neck and rounded rim of shouldered jar. Rim diameter c. 30 cm. *Fabric MF1*. Dark grey exterior surfaces, orange (burnt) interior surface and breaks and grey core. Context SA16.

Unillustrated. Finger tip impressed rim of small ?shouldered jar. Rim diameter c. 8cm. *Fabric MF1*. Dark grey exterior surface, dark grey to red brown interior surface and dark grey core. Context SA16

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Appendix 1. Late Bronze Age ‘foreign stone’ from Birdham

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Late Bronze Age deposits at Birdham yielded clasts of Lower Greensand, greensand chert and shale (Table 4). The greensand is of a siliceous variety derived from the Hythe Beds to the west of the River Arun. Three fragments retain traces of picked and ground surfaces comparable to those of complete saddle querns. Differences in chert content indicates that they derive from two – and perhaps three – different quern stones, each from a slightly different source (not the Lodsworth quarry). Further differences in colour, consistency and fracture pattern between naturally occurring stone and the Birdham assemblage indicate that most of it was burned prior to discard. Both the greensand chert and the shale are water-rolled and derive from either an active or a fossil beach. Although both stone types may have been deliberately selected by the occupants of the site (they were utilized on different early first millennium BC sites on Selsey Bill: Kenny 1989, 15; Seager Thomas 1998, 21), neither show signs of working or use wear.

Context	Stone type	Gms.	Qty.	Use wear	Burnt	Source
3	Lower Greensand	154	4	1	4	Hythe Beds, west of the Arun
	Greensand chert	19	2	0	0	Beach deposit
9	Lower Greensand	82	2	1	2	Hythe Beds, west of the Arun
17	Lower Greensand	15	1	1	1	Hythe Beds, west of the Arun
23	(very cherty) Lower Greensand	129	1	0	1	Hythe Beds, west of the Arun
27	Shale	108	1	0	1	Beach deposit

Table 4. finds of ‘foreign stone’ from Birdham

